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Council gives OK to negotiate with state on sewer issue

On Tuesday, the Wilmington City Council authorized the city to negotiate with the state Department of Environment and Natural Resources on a contract that would outline efforts to improve the troubled Northeast Interceptor (NEI) force main and ways to help reduce the amount of wastewater flowing through the NEI while the repairs are underway.

The contract, called a Special Order of Consent (SOC), would make the city accountable for getting needed repairs done or face steep fines. The city already has a repair plan in place and underway; recommended repairs are expected to be completed by April, 2008.

Although the repair efforts have been clearly identified, options for reducing flow through the NEI are not yet finalized – the county is expected to vote on the same draft of options the city approved on Tuesday and then come up with a finalized list of strategies that both elected bodies would then vote on.

The city, county and Wrightsville Beach all contribute to the wastewater flowing through the NEI, which is nine miles long and runs from Wrightsville Beach to the Southside Treatment Plant on River Road.

Highlights of the flow reduction options being considered:

- Diverting some wastewater currently flowing through the NEI from the Southside Treatment Plant to the Northside Treatment Plant, which is undergoing a major expansion;
- Putting pans in manholes in the NEI service area to reduce the amount of rainwater entering the sewer system;
- Investigating manholes and pipes to identify areas where ground or storm water may be entering the wastewater system through cracks or holes in sewer pipes or manholes. Holes or cracks can be repaired to staunch the flow of ground or storm water into the system, thereby reducing the flow of wastewater flowing to the Southside Treatment Plant;

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- Allowing building permits and individual connections or “taps” for residential construction in the NEI service area to continue, but putting some limits on commercial building permits in the NEI service area until capacity at Northside is increased or the NEI improvements are completed;

(NOTE: Broadly defined, a sewer line that connects to a private residence/office building to a sewer main pipe is called a "tap." A pipeline that connects to a sewer main pipe or other system that serves several buildings is called an “extension.” The current state moratorium in place prohibits only extensions, not individual taps.)

- Expanding the moratorium currently in place that prohibits sewer extensions in the NEI service area to include the service area of the Northside treatment plant;
- Lastly, continuing and expanding water conservation efforts and finding ways to gather data to help better manage the flow through the system.

More detailed information can be found on the city’s website at www.wilmingtonnc.gov on the Sewer Improvement Page.